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In memoriam: Frances Austin (1935-2023)

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OBITUARY



In Memoriam – Frances Austin (1935–2023)

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Readers of *English Studies* may remember Points of Modern English Syntax (PMES), an interactive language feature that discussed debated and debatable language issues like sentences with a superfluous form of auxiliary *do*, as in *Above all does he fantasise about a long-lost world*. This example was taken from the last time the feature appeared in 2010.¹ Initiated by E. Kruisinga,² PMES was taken over by Frances Austin in 1995 from Herman Wekker, who only intermittently made any contributions to it.³ In effect, therefore, Frances was the one who revived the feature, renamed as Points of Modern English Usage (PMEU). It is with great sadness that we now announce Frances's death on 30 September 2023, resulting from a fall from which she never recovered.

Frances in effect took over PMEU from her – and my own – former PhD supervisor, Noel Osselton, who had published the feature before her for fifteen years as well (1968–1983). Her interest in contributing to PMEU may have been sparked by the fact that she produced an index, accompanied by synopses, of the constructions dealt with by Osselton; the index was her contribution to Osselton's *Festschrift*, published in 1991. But it isn't merely for PMEU or her work on *modern* English usage that Frances will be remembered: her name is inextricably bound with the Clift family correspondence, letters exchanged between members of a late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century lower working-class family from Bodmin, in Cornwall. Based on her PhD thesis from the 1970s, she published an edition of the Clift letters in 1991, showing how various members of the family displayed different levels of literacy and were yet able to maintain a correspondence for many years. The youngest of the Clifts, William, attained standard English language use through reading popular literature and by other informal ways of educating himself, and he eventually became the first conservator of the Hunterian Museum in London, a museum that still exists today and is housed by the Royal College of Surgeons.

Frances not only analysed the Clifts' language: she also studied their letter-writing habits, analysing their use of epistolary formulas as well as taking up the question of whether they had had a letter-writing manual at their disposal that would have taught them how to write proper letters. Acquiring the art of letter writing was found to be an important means of improving one's social position,⁴ but actual readership of such

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¹*English Studies* 91:2, 170–9, at page 170.

²Erades, "Introduction," 1.

³Annually between 1983 and 1987, and after that only in 1990. PMES did not appear between 1991 and 1995, when Frances came in to resume the project.

⁴See Whyman, *The Pen and the People*.

manuals is extremely hard to prove. She wrote a comparable article on Julia Miles, the wife of the poet William Barnes, on whose work Frances's husband Bernard Jones was a specialist. These publications are all indispensable for anyone studying Late Modern English letter-writing practice, and a list of them is provided below. Frances, moreover, contributed several entries to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, on William Clift's son, William Home Clift, as well as on a number of eighteenth-century English grammarians: Daniel Fenning, James Greenwood and William Ward.

Frances Austin was a pioneer in historical sociolinguistics, analysing the language of a period, Late Modern English, at a time well before any significant tools to that end were available. The field has meanwhile developed in a major way, and her publications have been of immense importance for my own work on Late Modern English grammars and letter writing, but also on that of others, and not only within the field of the history of English, as recent work on the important Dutch Letters as Loot project shows.⁵ By providing a list of her publications here, it is hoped not only that her memory as an academic lives on, but also that her work will continue to inspire younger generations of scholars in the years to come.

An overview of Frances Austin's publications:

- 1973 "Epistolary Conventions in the Clift Family Correspondence." *English Studies* 54: 9–22, 129–140. Reprinted in *A Reader in Early Modern English*, edited by Mats Rydén, Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade and Merja Kytö. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998. 319–347.
- 1983 (ed.) *The Letters of William Home Clift, 1803–1832*. Sturminster Newton (Dorset): Meldon House.
- 1983 *Robert Clift of Bodmin, Able Seaman, 1790–1799*. Sturminster Newton (Dorset): Meldon House (41 pp.).
- 1985 "Relative Which in Late Eighteenth Century Usage: The Clift Family Correspondence." In *Papers from the 4th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics*, edited by Roger Eaton, Olga Fischer, Willem Koopman and Frederike van der Leek (eds.). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 15–29.
- 1989 *The Language of Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Basingstoke/London: Macmillan.
- 1990 ICEHL at Helsinki, 23–26 May 1990. The Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas Newsletter 14 (1990): 37–38.
- 1990 "Text as Social Indicator: The Letters of Julia Miles Barnes." In *Historical Linguistics and Philology*, edited by Jacek Fisiak. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton. 29–43.
- 1991 (ed.) *The Clift Family Correspondence*, Sheffield: CECTAL.
- 1991 "The Channel in the Clift Family Correspondence." *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 292: 97–105.
- 1991 "Points of Modern English Syntax 1968–1983." In *Language. Usage and Description. Studies Presented to Noel Osselton on the Occasion of his Retirement*, edited by Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade and John Frankis. Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi. 173–194.
- 1994 "The Effect of Exposure to Standard English: The Language of William Clift." In *Towards a Standard English 1600–1800*, edited by Dieter Stein and Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 285–313.
- 1996 "Lindley Murray's 'Little Code of Elementary Instruction'." In *Two Hundred Years of Lindley Murray*, edited by Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade. Münster: Nodus Publikationen. 45–61.
- 2000 "Letter Writing in a Cornish Community in the 1790s." In *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, edited by David Barton and Nigel Hall. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 43–61.

⁵See for instance Rutten and van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*.

- 2004 “*Heaving this Importunity*: The Survival of Opening Formulas in Letters in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics* 4. http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/heaving_this_importunity.htm.
- 2010 *A Chertsey Childhood, 1935–1945: Reminiscences*. Gillingham: Meldon House (80 pp.).

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- Rutten, Gijsbert, and Marijke van der Wal. *Letters as Loot: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dutch*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2014.
- Whyman, Susan E. *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.